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A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT

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The perfecting of democracy has already gone far beyond the experimental stage in no less than four hundred American cities. These communities have actually abolished "invisible government" and made the abolition "stick." The old-time boss has disappeared even in Hoboken, N. J., where he is a responsible being now, having been elected mayor! The personnel of the government has not been revolutionized, but the people's servants have been surrounded with a new atmosphere. Into their hands have been placed more powerful instruments wherewith to enforce the people's will and responsibility has come with the power. The characteristic delays and postponements of former days have given place to quick decisive action. Wider undertakings have been entered upon but the cost of government per unit of service has usually been materially reduced. In short, government has been readjusted to life.

Models of Irresponsibility and Inefficiency

The typical American city government prior to the commission government movement, was a more or less faithful copy of the nation and state. It was founded upon the same traditions of divided responsibility and the same ingenious mechanism of "checks and balances."

An analysis of such a city government throws a flood of light on the whole problem of responsible government. Picture a city organized on the general plan of Philadelphia, or Baltimore, or, until recently, St. Louis or Buffalo. Begin at the ballot box where the citizen officially does his thinking and expresses his desires or policies. Is it a simple issue that confronts him on election day? The powers that be have placed him in an arbitrary geographical compartment of the city. Without a sound reason, such as the unwieldiness of the city as a voting district, or the distinctive social make-up of his neighborhood, the municipality is divided according to the population figures and the voter is invited to make an issue

of alleged interests of his neighborhood as against those of the whole city—a false, artificial issue in most cities, but one which serves the local party organization ideally.

The case would not be so bad if the candidates for aldermen and councilmen stood squarely on the interests of the whole city or even of a particular corner of it. But not so. A second element of confusion is injected into the election: the voter is not privileged to select his councilman by the test of a live local question. He must choose with an altogether foreign consideration in mind. The Democrats perhaps have been in power in the country and the crops in the middle west have refused to grow. The voter, having a natural aversion to hard times, or having conceived in youth a life-long distrust of Democrats, has nothing to do but wreak his vengeance on the nearest visible object of his dislike that happens to have a nominal association with the national administration then in power. It is not simply that the city candidates are tagged with a national label. Worse than that, they are put at the bottom of the same long ticket with candidates for the national and state offices, so that the voter can hardly fail to drag his national party politics into the local contest.

Diverting the Voters' Attention

When the voter has finished with electing officials to interpret his wishes in the city governing body, that perhaps is the end of his troubles? No indeed! He must select the city's legal counsellor. Perhaps also he is required to pass upon the men who would file the city's records and manage a lot of clerical routine business—the candidates for city clerk. He may also be expected to vote upon an auditor. Now all these questions serve no other real purpose than to distract the voter's attention. The city's attorney is not the private adviser of the individual voters. He is no real issue to them. As for the city clerk, the only issue is that of office honesty and efficiency, which is scarcely a debatable question. And the auditor—his function is to keep accounts straight—a function for which he should be responsible to his direct superiors, the governing body.

But the end is not yet. The voter selects the chief executive. And the mayor looms up so much larger on the ballot; he is so much more conspicuous as a figure in the official community that in most

cities men have come to regard him as the one great local issue. They have come to regard the city as safe for at least another period if a "good man" was elected to the position. The mayor is not usually chosen on the merits of his policies. He is often simply a heroic figure set up to oppose some dark sinister person who is the particular outrage of the year. In the election campaign he is too busy dissecting his opponent's vices to seriously discuss any important local issue.

Watching the Sources of Public Policy

So much for the individual voter. Now for the electors in the mass: the legislating branch of the government has been assembled and the mayor and the other minor officers have taken the oath of office. Are the voters' troubles over? No, the issues are further complicated. It would not do to have the people keeping their attention on a single spot of government. They might too easily control the sources of official action! And so, the government is constructed to present to the electorate not one face, or two, or even possibly three, for the council is split into separate houses, the mayor constitutes a third source of power and each of the minor elective officers is commissioned directly by the people and thereby authorized to operate in his own little sphere. Every one of these separate offices is virtually a separate government. Every one of them is a standing issue in the community (or would be if the theory of popular election worked out). For why should the people elect a city attorney or a city clerk or an auditor, if he is not an issue to them? Why hold an election when there is nothing to decide?

But the multiplication of issues is surely ended? Hardly! When one looks to the outward organization in the separate houses of the council, he has not seen the source of real power and activity. He must dig deeper, for the council is divided up in committees and the really important policies are already decided when they come before the official representatives of the people—and confusion is multiplied as many more times as there are committees in both houses of the council.

Mixing up Law-Making with Administration

But let us keep going. The council surely will have the goodness to confine itself to the sort of things that councils are sup-

posed to do, *i.e.*, the framing of laws and giving of general directions to the operating departments of the city. But not so under the old order of city government. Such councils confuse their law-making functions and tangle themselves up with a lot of questions of detail which keep them from looking the policies of the city squarely in the face. They are obliged, for example, to pass upon the appointments of administrative offices made by the mayor under a beneficent "check" known as "confirmation." If it comes to a straight open issue as to whether Main Street is to be extended, that simple question has to be balanced against the appointment of the third assistant deputy of charities. If it is a question of restricting the number of saloons, that may be tangled up with the selection of a deputy wharfinger. The chances are also that the committees of the councils, instead of framing up the policies for the city, will actually try to act as the executive heads of the city departments. And this notwithstanding they are not elected on that issue or with any reference to their fitness to perform such specific services, but only to represent the wishes of one of the districts of the city.

No Clear Executive Issue

Turn now to the executive side of the government. The mayor is at the head. But at the outset we discover that the voters cannot make a clear issue with him of any bad piece of administration that is perpetrated. The mayor simply is not responsible for the duties which are legally conferred upon him. He undertakes a policy of retrenchment in the water department. But the "confirmation" clause in the charter dictates that any man he may propose for executing that trust must be satisfactory to the powers that control the council. It may be, too, that he will need legal advice before proceeding on a given course. But unlike any private executive, he has no choice in the selection of his own lawyer. The people (nominally) have decided that question for him in advance, as though the city attorney were *their* private lawyer. The mayor may even find the incumbent scheming to discredit his administration in the eyes of the people. The mayor may be blamed for the mismanagement of the finances. But he has practically no choice but to put his stamp of approval on the work of the council who, with precious little real executive knowledge of administrative needs, have framed the budget to their own liking. And so when the

mayor turns up for reëlection and his record is under discussion, he can always say that he has not been given the proper where-withal to do the work entrusted to him.

Descending into the depths of city government, perhaps we shall find the issues clear at last. Physicians in the hospitals will be chosen for their skill in coping with disease; draftsmen in the engineering departments for their mechanical ability; inspectors because of their peculiar fitness to inspect public works. These would seem clear administrative issues. But everybody knows that the issues here, again, are clouded. Bricklayers are not selected for hospital work, but doctors who ought to be bricklayers are given preferment. Barbers, perhaps, are chosen as building inspectors and grocery clerks for foremen. The issue of skill and efficiency is obscured beyond all recognition by the issue of personal reward for party service.

Parallel Conditions in State Government

Now every American citizen knows that the foregoing is but a tame, conservative description of political conditions in American cities. He perhaps does not realize that while the 400 cities have been rescued from the deep dark jungle of confusion, state governments remain practically exact parallels in every detail of the system described. To summarize:

- (1) State governments suffer from the confusion of jurisdictions (national, state and local) when state officers are elected on the same ballot with congressmen, United States senators and local officers.
- (2) The artificial district plan (although more justifiable and perhaps even unavoidable in the state government) gives rise to petty localisms and log-rolling.
- (3) Bi-cameral legislative bodies leave the state voter guessing as to where the source of the law-making power really is.
- (4) The legislative committees often essay to exercise what amounts to executive power over the heads of administrative departments, especially in financial matters.
- (5) The legislature elected to make laws, and properly on that issue alone (if politics is to be clear and simple) exercises a real appointing power through "confirmation."
- (6) The election of minor administrative state officials drags administration into politics.
- (7) The responsibility of the executive is obscured in the exercise of the appointing and budget making power.
- (8) In all but ten states the clerical, technical and professional officers and

employees of the state are chosen without any definite examination of their fitness for their particular work, and probably in the majority of cases because of party service rendered.

How the Federal Government Suffers

The federal government also is a sufferer from most of the confusion of issues which has done more than anything else to make city government "the most conspicuous American failure." Only three qualifying statements need be made in this connection:

- (1) The federal government has no elective administrative officials, not even an elective judiciary.
- (2) The merit system has been extended well down into the administrative service.
- (3) The federal government gets rather the best of it in popular elections by commanding the attention of the electorate as against state and local issues.

A significant point to remember is that these three exceptions from the general rule of American practice probably account for the reputation for superior efficiency which the federal government enjoys.

Cities Pointing the Way Out

Now the cities of America have found the way out of former perplexities and difficulties by a sweeping process of simplification. We may take the new Dayton city government as a type.

When the voter starts to form his government he casts his ballot not as the denizen of an artificial geographical section of the city. He is expected to act as a citizen of the community as a whole and the ballot affords no encouragement for his being anything else.

When he places his cross opposite the name of a candidate he is not forced to bring to mind the state of the wheat crop in Kansas or the policy of the Democratic administration in Mexican affairs. It is a straight, unconfused local issue which is put before him.

On his ballot are the names of none but candidates for legislative or law-making offices—and only one set of these, all of equal rank and importance. He must think of his candidates not in terms of their executive or professional ability, but simply as to the degree in which they represent his general point of view on city affairs.

In voting for his candidates, since he votes for a group, it is

practically impossible for him to vote *against* anyone. He must vote *for* somebody. So that there would be no particular point in any candidate going about and throwing up a lot of dust in the eyes of the people by abusing someone else on the ticket and neglecting the vital question at issue.

Likewise, the whole body of voters are able to watch a single group of men at the city hall and know that by doing so they control the source of power, policy and activity all the way down the administration to the last office boy. They do not have to watch the city legislatures, plus a mayor, plus a number of independent elective administrative officers. There is one source of power and not half a dozen.

Legislature Has Real Responsibility

And when the council gets down to work the citizen knows that what he sees in the open council meeting is real business and not a lot of fake motions calculated and designed to fool him.

The council has been divested of the care over the details of administration and it is able to devote itself exclusively to the one purpose for which it has been chosen, the framing of policies. It makes only one appointment. There is no material for trades and deals. Its members do not attempt to act as heads of administrative departments.

On the executive side, the issue is equally simple. In the first place, the executive (city manager) is not selected for his oratory or for his wire-pulling proclivities. The only issue in his selection is his ability to fill a post whose duties are well defined.

As it is not his business to decide *what* the city shall do but only to execute orders and to *make suggestions* of policies, he is not chosen by the people but by the governing body, which in its turn is responsible to the people for getting its orders enforced.

A Responsible Executive

And having been appointed to do executive work he (the city manager) is given control over the tools with which to execute the job. He does not select his commissioner of public works or commissioner of finance from a list of men who have friends on the council or who have shown a particular *unfitness* for their duties, but from the men who are particularly qualified in the special lines.

The city manager also formulates the budget and he is the appropriate person to do it since he knows the financial needs of the city as no mere fraction of the council can. Since he represents the interests of the whole city and all the departments, he can view every request for appropriations in its relation to every other. But the city manager only recommends and suggests and the power of the purse is retained in the elective body where it belongs.

The responsibility of the executive, moreover, is facilitated by the "merit system," which enables him to sift the qualifications of candidates for administrative office, relieves him of the burden of the detail of selection and leaves him free to plan and execute the policies laid down for him by the city's governing body.

And so we have in Dayton and the other thirty or forty odd cities that are organized on the same plan, a complete disentanglement of the lines of responsibility. This is a process of making the citizens as well as the officers responsible. There is a complete clearing up of the issues, political, executive and administrative.

We therefore seem to have, in the example of city governments of the city-manager type (and to a less degree in the older commission government type), a suggestive program of constructive simplification for every unit of government. These cities have standardized the principle of responsibility as the key to the representative, responsible, efficient administration of public affairs.